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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S ELECTIONS AS SEEN FROM THE "TRNC"

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher for reason 1.5 (b) and (d).).

¶1. (SBU) With only six days until Turkey goes to the polls, the July 22 election is, perhaps surprisingly, not at the forefront of everyone's minds in Cyprus's north, the self-proclaimed, unrecognized "TRNC." This is partly because ongoing domestic issues, including a "government" financial scandal and a controversial social security law, have been grabbing the headlines. But it is also partly because Cyprus, as an issue, has so far played little role in Turkey's election campaign; the absence of Cyprus in the Turkish debate is, as we see it, a good thing, since the issue would almost certainly become a nationalist football kicked around by those opposed to a policy of reunification. Moreover, there is little Turkish nationals on Cyprus can do to influence the election. Most Turkish Cypriot observers have taken a fatalist wait-and-see approach, though everyone appears to have his own differing prediction on how the election on the mainland should turn out and how that result will affect this island.

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE DOWN HERE

¶2. (C) Turkish Cypriot political party leaders have universally expressed to Poloffs their belief that Turkey's July 22 election will have a significant impact on local politics and on the prospects for a Cyprus solution. Several admit that important "government" decisions have been postponed until after the election results become clear. They also conveyed unease with the possibility that several Turkish parties may cross the 10 percent electoral barrier, making already awkward political alliances between Turkish and Turkish Cypriot politicians more difficult. Omer Kalyoncu, Secretary General of ruling CTP, for instance, commented to Poloff on 21 June that his party hoped for a strong AKP showing, not because of any natural affinity between the two parties, but because AKP has a Cyprus platform compatible with CTP's vision of a Cyprus solution. He seemed confident that, provided the AKP can hold on to the Prime Ministry, Turkey's policy on Cyprus will remain much the same as it is now. However, when asked about a possible coalition between the AKP and a more nationalist party like Turkey's MHP, Kalyoncu could only hope that its previously "responsible," pro-EU policies approach exhibited while in government (1999-2002) was a good harbinger.

¶3. (C) Opposition UBP, on the other hand, would prefer that the AKP be humbled at the polls. The two parties have little in common ideologically, particularly regarding EU accession; Turkish Cypriot UBP is stolidly state-focused and suspicious of the EU and its reforms. One UBP "MP," Hasan Tacoy, tacitly expressed this view in a 29 June meeting with Poloff, criticizing the AKP government for being too willing to sacrifice "TRNC" interests in its EU application process. The UBP and its labor union allies have also jumped at the opportunity to protest both summer religious courses and a new social security law as being alien concepts introduced at the behest of Ankara. Tacoy and his UBP cohorts were crossing their fingers for a coalition of Turkey's state-focused CHP and MHP, both of which have stood firm on nationalist platforms concerning the "TRNC" as well as Turkey's relationship with the EU, he noted. Tacoy claimed, though, that his party would be OK if the AKP were forced into a coalition with a junior partner that would force it to take a more guarded stance on the Cyprus problem.

¶4. (C) Former coalition member and now also in opposition Serdar Denktash's DP appeared to be the most indifferent to Turkey's upcoming election, but was eager to get past it so that local political wheeling-dealing could start up again. Denktash advisor Kudret Akay was sanguine in a 5 July meeting with Poloff believing that the AKP cannot repeat its 2002 performance because a third party, if not possibly a fourth or fifth, was sure to pass the electoral barrier. Consequently, he said, there will almost surely be a new political balance in Turkey; Turkish Cypriots, as always, would be forced to adjust. He was anxious to get on with this "inevitable adjustment period." According to Akay, Turkey's election season, coupled with popular discontent with the local CTP-OP "government," has tied the CTP's hands.

NICOSIA 00000594 002 OF 003

"Once this election is over," he hoped, "CTP can jettison its corrupt junior partner," and pass a set of election reform laws leading to fresh "parliamentary" elections here on the island.

WHAT ROLE FOR TURKISH SETTLERS AND TEMP WORKERS?

¶5. (C) Elections in Turkey will have a different impact on the Turkish nationals who live and work on Cyprus. A large proportion of these Turks settled in Cyprus over the years in an attempt to flee poverty or discrimination in Turkey. Though they may not intend to return to Turkey, according to Mete Hatay of the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), they realize that Turkey's impact on their lives is still great. There are also several other groups of Turkish nationals in Cyprus's north -- students, soldiers, and temporary workers, particularly in the construction and tourism industries -- who intend eventually to return to Turkey and, therefore, might have an interest in the election results. However, in order to cast their vote, expatriate Turks would have to report to one of several designated Turkish ports; the vote would then be counted in the citizen's province of registration. Given the cost involved, relatively few Turkish citizens on Cyprus are expected to actually vote. Hatay, who has compiled demographic research on Turkish citizens living on Cyprus, told Poloff 11 July that he has seen little indication that Turkish nationals here intend to vote in large numbers, thus the absence of related political campaigning on the island. He noted that, even if they were to vote, their preferences would probably not differ significantly from those of the Turkish population at large; Turkish citizens here come from diverse backgrounds -- rural Turks, Kurdish villagers, left-leaning Alevis, military retirees. Hatay doubted that these groups could have much impact on the province-by-province outcomes, since they originated from diverse regions on the mainland. Hatay offered that only a few Turkish provinces, including Hatay province on Turkey's border with Syria, may be vulnerable to

a targeted campaign because of a disproportionate number of expatriates on the island. He has seen no evidence of any Turkish party campaigning, however.

¶6. (C) When asked if Turkish expatriates, despite the above turnout prediction, have a particular party preference, Hatay claimed that they would generally support a return of the AKP government. He held that his research dispels the common belief that Turkish settlers tend to be more nationalist; after all, they now have a direct interest in any Cyprus settlement and would supposedly support parties in Turkey and in Cyprus accordingly. But, when compared to Turkish Cypriot voters, Hatay showed, these Turkish settlers support a range of parties on the island and are by-and-large pragmatic voters. He also noted that expatriates split their vote 50-50 in the April 2004 Annan Plan referendum; with the CTP in power, they have become generally more accepting of the idea of a possible bizonal, bicommunal solution, Hatay claimed. He concluded from these data that Turkish citizens on Cyprus would generally prefer a return of the AKP government. According to Hatay, even the secular socialists among the expatriates tend to support the CTP -- and by extension the AKP -- rather than Turkey's CHP.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) It is impossible for the results of the Turkish elections to please all sides of the Turkish Cypriot political spectrum. The guarded optimism expressed by CTP and UBP members sounds more like positive spin on a high-variance situation than a reflection of actual expectations. Even DP's more realistic muddle-through scenario contains some spin: it assumes that the parties that enter the Turkish Grand National Assembly will create a stable, capable government. There is the fear here that a possible return in Turkey to the acrimonious, unstable political environment of the 1990s could force it into a reactive, rather than constructive, position in relation to the Cyprus problem; the last few months, during which Talat's latitude to engage on the UN track clearly has been stifled, is proof of this negative potential. The underlying hope

NICOSIA 00000594 003 OF 003

among Turkish Cypriot politicians, whether conscious or not, is that Turkey's election will be decisive one way or the other, so that the "TRNC" has a familiar and stable political environment within which to work. End comment.

SCHLICHER